TRANSCRIPT--CLIFFORD W. COTTON II

Interviewee: Clifford W. Cotton II

Interviewer: Zoe Rhine; Joe Newman

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Abstract: Librarian Zoe Rhine and North Carolina Room Board member Joe Newman, Pack Memorial Library, interviewed Asheville native Clifford W. Cotton II, Stephens-Lee High School alumnus and grandson of West Asheville entrepreneur E .W. Pearson. Cliff recounts many memories of growing up in Asheville and on the path toward a career in music, for example, remembering Stephens-Lee band instructor teacher Madison "Doc" Lennon.

Zoe Rhine: Well, let me officially start this. I'm Zoe Rhine, librarian in the North Carolina Room, and today is September the 9th of 2019. And I'm here with Joe Newman, Friend of the North Carolina Room and board member, and we're talking with Cliff Cotton. Cliff, would you mind just saying your name and spelling?

Cliff Cotton: Yeah, Cliff Cotton, Clifford C-L-I-F-F-O-R-D W. Cotton C-O-T-T-O-N, the second.

JN: Do you prefer Clifford or Cliff?

CC: I prefer Cliff.

JN: Okay.

CC: Yeah. I was raised right in Asheville, born and raised right here. Clifford W. Cotton the first. My mother was Annette P. Pierce, and grandfather, her father was E. W. Pearson, a famous entrepreneur in the Asheville area and they were both raised, well, my father was from Georgia. My mother is originally from Asheville.

ZR: Did you all live in one, same place?

CC: Same place. I'm still living at the same place. (Laughter) I came back to the same place.

ZR: And you're in Southside?

CC: No, West Asheville.

ZR: Oh, West Asheville. I should've known that.

JN: Is that Burton Street?

CC: Yeah, yeah, Burton Street. I always go back to the same house, same place. Of course seems like the house got smaller. (Laughter)

ZR: And where did you go to elementary school?

CC: Burton Street, went to Burton Street first 'til sixth grade. At that time Burton Street School was three classrooms. And you know, the first and second was the same room,

and the third and fourth in the same room, and the fourth--fifth and sixth in the same room. So we were all together. You were in the fifth grade then you learned what the higher grade learned because you got it all simultaneously, more or less. So you got a little step ahead of everybody else but in a sense, we were behind. So, I went there and on to junior high, which was Hill Street. Hill Street was seventh and eighth grade. And from there on to Stephens-Lee, starting in ninth grade, through senior in high school. Stephens-Lee. That was the class of 1960 that I graduated from.

ZR: At Burton Street, were there any teachers you want to mention, or any of your high school ones?

CC: Yeah, the principal, Miss Jones, Miss Gertrude Jones. Se was the principal at Burton Street. And then, Mr. White was a teacher. But I mainly remember Miss Ashton, she was kind of an arts teacher. And she taught drawing, and arts, arts and crafts, all kinds of things, more or less arts and crafts, which I've learned quite a bit from her because I went on to produce handmade handbags. Matter of fact I had a shop in Los Angelesmany years later. And she told us how to do tooling in leather and lace and ( ) I made custom bags, any shape, any color with your name inscribed on it. I just thought about that. That's where I learned that, at Burton Street.

JN: Was there any kind of musical program, or encouragement for people with your kind of talent?

CC: Well, yeah, there was a Glee Club. There was the Glee Club, and there was always music. There was always music in my house. My mother played organ and piano, and we had a piano in the house.

JN: I see. Did she play at church?

CC: Yeah, she did, and so she was always encouraging me into music. Short time I had music lessons. When I was--five, seven, I don't know how old I was. I had to go over to the YWCA when it was right there on College Street. Used to go over there, and it was like, fifty cents a lesson or something like that. So I, kind of got out of that, what later on I realized the reason I got out was because I was having trouble seeing the music. I later found out I had what they call a weak muscle cross-eyed, my eyes would crossed. That's why I wear glasses today in fact. So, that's why I kind of dropped out of the piano lessons. But my mother still plays. She still plays church programs with my aunt. They do duets together all over town, all the time. So music was always in the family. You know, arriving at Burton Street, my uncle, who's E. W. Pearson, Jr., he worked at WLOS, they had a jazz program called Professor Bop Show. So that kept the music going, because all the record companies would send him records to play on the radio show. So the ones he didn't want to use, I would get them, he'd give them. So I had a large record collection and that went on for years and years. After the show was over they would still send records to him. It was mostly black records, like ( ) records, ( ) records, mainly black artists. I had a large collection of records, because they would come free very month. I wish I had some of those original records today. I think my son finally got a hold of them and thought it was Christmas.

Yeah. So, another thing about Burton Street. As I went on to Stephens-Lee, I got encouragement from the music director at Stephens-Lee, who was "Doc" Lennon. Madison Lennon was his name, and I remember him coming to Burton Street just feeling who was interested in music, because, just prepare yourself to be in the band. Which, I'd

never thought about being in the band at Stephens-Lee, but that time he came in and encouraged us to, who was interested in music, to kind of step up and see what we could do.

JN: That's wonderful.

CC: Yeah, he was the guy that introduced that to us at Burton Street. So I wanted an instrument so went up to the corner store, there was a grocery store on the corner of Burton Street and Haywood Road, it was called Pearly Roses.The proprietor, his name was Don, and some way he heard about it, said, "Well, I've got an old trumpet here," and I said, "Well, that sounds good." So I take this trumpet, it was $15 or something. So I take my little paper money, my seed and flower money I made on the side, finally got this trumpet. And not knowing anything about the instrument, but this trumpet was bent up. It wouldn't half play. I mean, you just couldn't get a sound out of, but I had my horn! (Laughter) I finally got my trumpet but the valves were stuck. I had no idea what ( ) at that time. So that kept me in music for a while, but mainly the records that I would get from my uncle's record collection just kept coming and kept coming, and I had all kinds of music.

JN: Did you start playing the saxophone at Stephens-Lee?

CC: I start playing the saxophone at Stephens-Lee. Okay, when I finally started Stephens-Lee I signed up for the band. Well at that time, you know the band, you know, a significant amount was upperclassmen. There wasn't but a few saxophones. So I wanted to play either alto or tenor. So at that time that was not open. Not available. They said, "Well, there's one you can share, we've got baritone, you can share it with one of the

upperclassmen. His name was Clyde Waters. “You can share it with Clyde Waters because he’s going to graduate up the line.” So I think that’s how I decided to play--well, that’s what I had to play because that was the only thing available, so I continued the baritone sax and I play the baritone sax to this day. At that time, Doc Lennon, if he’d find me--just before class or just before band practice, we would all be in there, some of the saxophone players and some of the guys would be in the corner trying to play rhythm and blues on the saxophone, trying to play some of the phrases and stuff you’d hear saxophones playing on different records, but Doc Lennon didn’t allow that, you know--ruler! (Motions as if swatting with a ruler) Pop! You got to learn how to read the music! ( )trying to bring everybody in. You got to learn how to read the music! (Laughter) You know, so he encouraged us very much to read from the music instead of trying to figure out, you know, so he definitely didn’t allow us to play, you know, rhythm and blues, mix them up. But that kind of changed later on when he found out that’s the direction we were going. Because it got to the point where by the time I graduated, I got to keep the horn myself. And it got to a point where he would allow me to bring it home on the weekends. So I’d get on the bus, got a big baritone saxophone, that’s one of those pictures right there.

JN: Yeah, that was a big one.

CC: ( ) saxophone. So, I would lug it on the bus, back of the bus, go sit down, every weekend. Bring it home, try to play the records and stuff. So, that’s kind of why he decided, we couldn’t play in the band room, but he kind of decided to go on and encourage us to kind of, keep on doing what you doing, after that. He wasn’t going to stop us, so he kind of encouraged us to go on. All of us were in the band together.

JN: What has his instrument?

CC: His instrument was clarinet. He played every instrument. I mean, he had the phrasing, the skills for every instrument in the band. Yeah, he was a very talented, talented man.

ZR: So tell us about The Untils again, if you don't mind, so we can get it on the recorder.

CC: Okay well The Untils. Well that started, every year they would have a talent show in the auditorium. And so we thought we would play, and this was mainly--(pointing to photograph) members of The Untils here, that's Stanley Beard, that's Tom Jones, and that's Bruce Ryder. All three of us was in the saxophone section in the high school band. We were always playing together. Somebody knew a younger drummer, which was Jimbo, he was about three years younger than us, two years younger than us, and somebody had to play the guitar so we found this guy, McAllen, he was a Preacher's son, so he couldn't go to too much unless he snuck out.

(Laughter)

JN: And he played with an amp, didn't he?

CC: Yeah, he brought his amp. And then of course, Cornell [Proctor] was the keyboard player, I don't see him on here. (Coughing)

ZR: Where did y'all practice?

CC: We practiced mainly at the old school on Burton Street, across from the center ( ). When it was closed we'd practice up there. A lot of times we would practice at the

YMCA. Those were the two places we practiced. Anyway, so there was a talent show, so we thought we would gather a band together, we have our group together, so we performed at this talent show. We performed but there was always one guy that won every talent show. He had a singing group. Because all the girls loved singing. His name was Charles Pickens.. And that's Pickens right there. (Pointing to photograph)

JN: Okay.

CC: He was kind of the lead singer. So of course they won, and we came on, and some teacher said, well, that was good, but y'all don't have--we didn't have a singer. So we talked to Pickens and decided to combine the two groups. So that's why there's the singing group, when you got The Untils, you've got the singing group, and the band, in one unit. So I would play in the band, and when the singing group's done, I would go an sing with the group.

JN: And the other saxophones were going in the--.

CC: Yeah. So it was a combination of ( )and Pickens's group, and of course the band.

JN: And what are some of the songs, especially with vocals, that people liked?

CC: Oh! Well, ( )"Silhouette," "Get a Job," "In the Still of the Night." Things like that.

(Laughter)

JN: See, white kids heard all that, too.

ZR: And I missed, I didn't read where The Untils's name came from.

CC: Well, it's a couple stories. Well, we didn't have a name, we couldn't think of a name, so there's different versions, but I--people claim the name, but I remember my father saying, "What y'all going to do? What's the name of the group?" and I said, "well, we don't know, we're still practicing." And he said, "Well, how long you going to practice?" And I said, "Well, until we get better." And he said, "Well, until you get better. That's a good name. Until." (Laughter) So, Untils stuck, until we get better.

ZR: Perfect. I assume Doc Lennon heard you play.

CC: Oh yeah. Every time we got to the corner we would perform and they asked if we would come to the City Auditorium. You know the City Auditorium is called the Civic Center now, but then it was called the City Auditorium and it was a little smaller. We got to go on to play with some--.

JN: That was a big deal.

CC: That was a big deal then. Big stage, some of the bands were Fats Domino, Little Richard and all those bands in those times. Matter of fact we ourselves--Fats Domino had great backing but the band we liked the best and kind of patterned ourselves after was a band that played with Little Richard, Larry Williams, and Louie John. It was a band from Texas called The Upsets and they had the same instrumentation we had: two tenors, a baritone sax. That was the same instrumentation that they had. So we patterned ourselves after that group, The Upsets, and we backed up a lot of blues groups at that time and that's who we patterned our instrumentation off of.

JN: I bet Doc Lennon was proud of y'all when you got good, played down at the auditorium. Would he admit that?

CC: I don't think so.

ZR: Did he offer you all any advice?

CC: Just, "Keep learning your craft. Keep practicing. Learn your craft." That was very encouraging to come from him at that particular time. Yeah.

ZR: Now the touring was segregated, right?

CC: At one time.

ZR: You played for Black crowds?

CC: Yeah, but at that particular time the Black kids were on the main floor, and the whites were in the balcony. So that kind of broke down after a while. It was kind of relaxed, I guess you'd say. Finally you'd see everybody down on the main floor, dancing and having a good time. But there were times when it was totally segregated.

ZR: Music will break down the barriers.

CC: Yeah, it broke down.

JN: Of course young people are generally quicker to want to break down the barriers than their parents.

CC: Terence was always at my house, he'd bring his guitar, playing and--.

JN: The white fellow?

CC: Yeah. He lived down the street, not too far, four or five blocks I guess. He was continuously at my house, playing his guitar, ( )but he explained that his parents were a little different, so I never went to their house. I never met his parents, never talked to them all the years we played together, I never went to his house. He'd come down, eat with us, he'd spend the whole afternoon, then he'd pack up and go back home.

JN: He must have been a good musician. Didn't he go to music school?

CC: He went to Berklee, yeah. Not to Berklee out of high school. He went to--might have been UNCA--but he ended up going to Berklee. And coming back and teaching at UNCA, in the Music Department. Just before he died, he had a position at Clemson, he'd gone down to teach music at Clemson. He died a short time after that. He was a good musician, he was a good fellow. A real good fellow.

JN: Cliff, did you make your main living from music in your life, or did you work like a lot of musicians, a day job and then play at night, or how did you--?

CC: A little bit of both. When I was off, didn't play music, I'd get other jobs. I was an insurance man at one time, I sold furniture. The first place for ( )years was Rose Furniture, They used to have a store way down in ( )for years, it was a big store in Atlanta. I stayed with them almost fifteen years before they went out of business and everything just dried up. My 401(k)--they went bankrupt, everything was gone. So I did different jobs in between. But I mainly just stuck with the music. When I left for college--I went to Knoxville College first, and then I transferred to North Carolina Central and that's when I found--I knew, my mother said she went to Central, but I never knew anything about it, she said she attended, that was her alma mater, that's where she went to

school, but I didn't find out how she had gone to school until one day I was going through some stuff I was going to get rid of, I saw these letters and things in this box, and come to find out she got to school because my grandfather had bartered some property for her to get to school, and he had fifty acres of property in Burke County. That he spoke to the president of Central for her to go to school, put up this property for her to go to school, so that's what he did. He sent a proposal and she went to school on that bond. I also have the receipt where he paid it off. Paid it off, got his property back, but I never knew that was the way she went to school. That was a very interesting letter. She said she went to school with Floyd McKissick, you know Floyd McKissick, the lawyer? Well she went to school with him--she mentioned that when I found ( )-- as matter of fact I met his daughter and she said, "Oh I know her father." I played with several bands in Durham, the Durham area, so, oh man, that's how we got in town with the Fiery Sparks. We kind of got separated, the main group got separated, so two of us went to Central, and two of us went to A & T and a couple of others went to Winston-Salem State. So we kind of separated after that but the people--the guy in the band that worked with the main group, called Fiery Sparks, was in Greensboro, which was Blues and Jitterbug. So by some kind of way he said, "Well, we're going to get the other guys," and so finally he got me and the group Fiery Sparks we ( ) the main group. So we kind of combined our group together, so we'd go to Greensboro and play with the group Fiery Sparks. So one of the dorm matrons was the manager of the group and he knew his brother was in Philadelphia, so he ( ) and said Philadelphia, and so we went to Philadelphia to perform, so we was in big time in Philadelphia, performed in Philadelphia and all these places. Anyway--. [Fiery Sparks also released a record while in Philadelphia.]

JN: Tell us about Philadelphia.

CC: So we went on to Philadelphia, performed in several night clubs, and during that time, some way we had an opportunity to go to New York. And we found out this engagement was at Smalls Paradise in New York. And that was one of biggest and hottest clubs in Harlem at that particular time. Smalls Paradise. Right there on 135th Street, right in the middle of everything that was happening in Harlem. In fact it was right across the street from Count Basie's place, Count Basie's place right across the street, and somebody else's down the block. So we went to Smalls Paradise, wow, we've made it big. We were there for a couple weeks, I think it was, it was during the Christmas holidays and the place was packed. We--.

ZR: So that was about '64?

CC: It was '62, '63. That's when Wilt Chamberlain owned Smalls Paradise. Oh, it was big time, because we were playing in the front—see, they had like a dance club, a wide bar, we played in the bar, and then in the back room was the showroom, where ( ) Tommy Johnson dancers, and they would feature somebody in the back, at that particular time it was Kim Weston, and after that was Gladys Knight, that's when I first met Gladys Knight, in the barroom in the back. So we played the front bar, and they'd give us about twenty minutes break, we'd go back and set up to play behind the show in the showroom, so during that time we got a chance to meet--I mean we were playing with people like King Curtis and Betty Bundock. He would go on first, and we would come on after they played. So we had to play--King Curtis would come on, and Willis Jackson and all those guys. A lot of times--the Apollo was right down the street, so a lot of times people would

come down from the Apollo and come by Smalls Paradise. So that's when we really got to know a lot of the entertainers who performed at Smalls. Chuck Jackson came by and said he wanted to sit in with us, because it just so happened that we knew a lot of his songs. And he finally came up and sang a couple of his songs, and we already knew his songs, we played them exactly the way he liked and we knew it. So that was very interesting. He said, "Well, I'm coming down to North Carolina, just a couple of us, and I want you guys to back me up." We said, "Okay, all right, we'll do it."

So there's one interesting thing that happened at that time, when we came off the stage one particular night and the place was packed, people just shoving at me, I couldn't hardly walk. So Wilt Chamberlain came up and said something to me, and handed me a hundred dollar bill. So I said, "Wow. ( ) that's a tip." I told the other guys in the band, "That's a tip. Look what he gave me. As soon as we take a break, we're going to go across the street to the Big Apple." A bar on the corner, the Big Apple. And the drinks were three for one. Gave you a dollar and you get three shot glasses. But everybody didn't go. ( ) A couple guys went over there and we spent a couple dollars. And when we came back to the club, this big guy comes over to me and wanted to know, "What did you do with the money?"

"What money do you mean?"

"Didn't Wilt give you a hundred dollar bill?"

I said, "Yeah."

"Well, he wanted change."

He gave me that to go get change for him. So the big guy jacked me up and I said, “Well, I didn’t understand what he was saying.” He wanted me to go get change for him for some reason, and I guess he figured he could trust me and give me a hundred dollar bill, but I thought it was a tip. Just so happened we didn’t spend but a couple dollars, I gave it back to him, so kind of brushed me off.

ZR: I forgot to ask you to hold up your “U.”

CC: Oh, that’s my Untils banner. This represents--we were trying to be like the Teenagers, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, they had a “T” on their sweaters, so we all had sweaters with “U”s on ours, for The Untils. That’s my school letter, Stephens-Lee band letter. In the band, that’s what you had. Crimson and gray were the school colors. This was one of the letters you got when you joined the band. That was my original letter from Stephens-Lee. How about that?

ZR: Are you guys going to let us talk about something other than music?

JN: One reason I’m here for the interview--Zoe and I have done a bunch of these together--Zoe said, “Be sure to ask all the questions about music.” So Zoe, we’ll turn it over to you now.

ZR: Do you have anything else you wanted to ask him?

JN: Oh, a thousand questions. No, you’ve covered your early days as a musician, and it’s of great interest to me and it will be to others.

CC: One other thing. Chuck Jackson did come to North Carolina and we ended up playing behind him so I ended up working with him a good ten years or so. And I ended up being his music director, band director--.

JN: So you traveled with him.

CC: We traveled all over, all over the South, and so when he did come to North Carolina, he looked us up and we joined up with him.

JN: I've got to ask one more. You were with Dick Clark and his touring rock and roll show. That was later? Can you tell us a little about that?

CC: Well before that, after the Chuck Jackson, matter of fact I haven't ( ) since Labor Day, I joined The Temptations, and matter of fact one of the guys in The Temptations, we got to be close friends on one of our tours that we used to have and he told me, "We got a song coming out that's going to be a hit, when it comes out we'll give you a call and ( ) the band out," and so forth. So the record came out, turned out to be a hit, he called me, and matter of fact it was Labor Day, I think it was sixty-four when that song came out, when "My Girl" came out. He called me and said, "Our song's going to be a hit, we got it out. Get your band together." I knew a couple of horns, so I got two of the horns from Chuck's band and we left on Labor Day weekend for Ohio and caught the bus to go to Detroit to join The Temptations band. So we were the first traveling band with The Temptations. "My Girl" was a hit at that particular time. So we traveled, did some traveling, and as everybody knows, after that, Motown moved to California and closed the operation down in Detroit and everything moved to Los Angeles. So a year or so after that, I went back to Philadelphia and worked with several groups there, then I moved to

Los Angeles and that's where I ran into Melvin Franklin of The Temptations and I met Smokey. In fact one guy--I used to work at a music store--one guy played saxophone and he said, "Well man, come out,"--this was New Year's Day—"come out and bring your horn out, I'm working out at the Marina with the Dick Clark show and I'm sure they want you to come and sit in with us." So I went out and took my horn, went out to the Marina, met all the guys in the band. Several people I had met before, with the Chuck Jackson group so I knew some of the people, The Shirelles and some of The Coasters. I had known them before, so he was surprised that they knew me and I knew them. After the show I was sitting with the band after the show was over they asked me if I wanted to join the band. I had a baritone sax, they didn't have a baritone sax, very few people had baritone sax at that particular time, so they asked me to join the group, so that's how I started with the Dick Clark Revue. Just going out and sitting in with one of my friends that I had met, Gary ( ), a very good saxophone player because we knew some of the same people. Matter of fact, he was one of the guys that worked for the band I mentioned before, The Upsetters. I didn't know him personally but I knew of The Upsetters and kind of knew about him through associating with The Upsetters ( ) years earlier.

ZR: From Asheville to L.A., that's a big jump.

JN: And then to wind up with Dick Clark, traveling with one of his rock and roll shows, that was the 1990s? Is that right?

CC: It was the '80s.

JN: And your job was basically with the stage band, to back up whichever singers came out for Dick Clark? Is that the way it worked?

CC: Yeah, we worked with everybody from Frankie Avalon, to Bobby Rydell, all the Dick Clark--.

JN: The American Bandstand.

CC: That was interesting. That was very nice for me, that particular year you might say was just first class all the way. We went all over.

JN: I've heard he treated musicians very well.

CC: Oh yeah, very friendly, very nice, friendly guy. Yeah.

ZR: Did you keep coming home during that time?

CC: Not too much. Every so often, I get a break and come back. Once I left I never came back for more than two or three days, starting in college. Until just recently, you know, I was sitting out there about to fall down, in fact I could fall down now. Anyway, I thought I would come back and try to get it together. Working on that.

ZR: When did you come back?

CC: It's been a couple of years now. I lived in Atlanta before over here. I went from Los Angeles to Atlanta. I probably stayed in Atlanta for probably almost ten years, I guess. And so then the house was vacant up here, when I decided to come back up here. Got my family, and now my kids are with me here also. Everything's changed so much.

ZR: It's not too small for you?

CC: It's small, it's small, and things change. The places I used to go aren't there no more. I really don't know where guys my age still hang out, they don't go there. There's

pictures over there of the old times, ( ) many years ago. That was right down ( ). I remember those places.

ZR: Did you have any specific places you hung out growing up?

CC: Yeah. Well, other than the drugstore--they had the YMI and Steel's Drugstore across the street. For some reason I like Steel's Drugstore better because they made a better milkshake. Across the street was the YMI which was also a drugstore, so just any one you decided on, but I decided on Steel's Drugstore. The club upstairs, over Steel's Drugstore, I think it was called Bell and ( ) or something like that. So we'd go up there and they'd have dances and so forth. The main place at that particular time was the Southland Drive-in, which was down on McDowell right next to Rabbit's Motel. Rabbit's is still there, but Southland is torn down. The Southland Drive-in really wasn't a drive-in, it was more of a restaurant with a club in the back, it was called Southland Drive-in for some reason. It had one of those big parking lots, you could park out there in the front in the parking lot and drink your beer and stuff like that. I think that's why it was called a drive-in. But you go inside where the ( ) was. That was a very hot spot at that particular time. That was before the Owl Lounge. The Owl Lounge was right down the street on McDowell there by the Five Points, that area. That was a pretty nice club. Couple more, I can remember some of them, a couple more ( ) places right now.

ZR: Was the Orange Peel in your era?

CC: No. That was a skating rink. That was a little bit after my time. That was a skating rink at time I remember, it wasn't the Orange Peel. Orange Peel came later on, after we were gone.

ZR: Thinking back about Stephens-Lee, dare there any teachers that ended up meaning a lot to you?

CC: Miss Foster, she was my homeroom teacher. Matter of fact, by some coincidence I was in the same homeroom all four years. Sometime they change your homeroom teachers but at Stephens-Lee, when you first had separate classes at Stephens-Lee, you had your gym class, home ec class, Spanish, English class, you had to go to a different room. There were two classes in one room at Stephens-Lee, when all your classes were in different rooms with different teachers, it was real different. I remember Dusenberry, Mr. Dusenberry, he was the French teacher. I took French at that particular time. I remember going to his room, he was a very well-spoken French teacher. Of course, the band, I'll never forget the band. I still have memories about the band. I can always go back to that. That was my main interest, the band.

ZR: Did you do shop?

CC: No, I didn't do shop. I think we had shop at Hill Street. For some reason I didn't do shop. I don't remember doing shop or anything at Hill Street. ( ) Hill Street. I don't know why I didn't ever do it, take shop.

JN: That was Mr. Haith?

CC: Mr. Haith was at Stephens-Lee. I didn't have shop, I was always in the band room. I didn't play the sports. You know, my size, they said, "Why didn't you play sports?" I was in the band room. Basketball team, there was one championship, football team, was outstanding, but--.

JN: You were a tall fellow, did the basketball coach come around and try to recruit you?

CC: One thing see, I didn't have, in West Asheville we didn't have any place to place anything like that. So for me, we didn't have any basketball courts for us to play. We put a tire and put ( ) on it, if you missed the shot you had to run down and get it. So there was no place to play football, so we didn't play football, so I didn't have the sports in me when I was smaller, like most people have. We did play a little baseball, but that didn't happen.

ZR: Tell us about ASCORE, how that first started, how you got involved, what your parents thought.

CC: Well, ASCORE was like I mentioned, we patterned ourselves after the sit-in in Greensboro. We were high school students of course, Greensboro, that was college students doing the sit-in and so forth, it actually started with sit-ins in Greensboro, at A & T. So being the progressive class that we were, we wanted to be involved in some type of way, so we started doing it more or less ourselves. One of the things, we were trying to integrate the library, the one at Pack Square. Because we had to have a special pass or card or something to go in and get a book. We couldn't just walk in, go to the counter, go to a desk to find your book. We had to have a pass or special pass to go in the library over there. So we were trying to figure out why we had to do that, so we started trying to protest that particular area. We finally found, some teachers at Stephens-Lee finally realized what we were doing, and one of the main people that were on our side and showing us how to do this demonstration was Mr. Roland, and he had a jewelry store right down where the Police Department is now. Right on Market Street, one of those

shops right there, across from, on this side of the YMI Drugstore. There were little stores in there ( ) and that's where he had his shop, in there, so that's where we'd all cram in. It was a small shop, but we'd all cram in there and he would tell us how to handle things, if things got out of hand, somebody says something to you, and so forth. So that's how we, he was the main instructor, showed us how to stay calm and keep ourselves together. He really did a lot to help the movement, as well as some of the teachers, but Mr. Roland was the main one.

JN: Did Miss Forney work with you folks, after Stephens-Lee closed and Black students were at Asheville High, she did a lot in desegregation era. Do you remember her?

ZR: She's Pierce now.

JN: Yes, Ms. Pierce.

CC: Ms. Pierce, yeah, correct. I didn't know Miss Forney because I was gone. When Stephens-Lee closed, I was gone, I didn't even know about Asheville High and all that. Miss Pierce did that quite a bit. Yes, I remember her well. Matter of fact, some places with this, when you bring it up you don't really realize those places just don't, because that was a different time, you obeyed your parents. The parents said, "You can't go in there, don't go in there, ( )." This is what they said, you didn't just do what you wanted to do like kids do today. Many times I walked by the Imperial Theater, ( ) and that was a fabulous theater on the outside, they had a marquee, and big posters, walking around looking at the different posters, but you couldn't attend. I think the Imperial Theater is torn down now but ( ) so he told us, "Now you don't want to go there. If you want to go to a movie, if you want to go to The Plaza." It's closed now, but The Plaza, if you wanted

to go to The Plaza, you had to go around to the back of the theater, over by the Police Department, over by Roland's Jewelers, and there was a ramp, you walked up the back, up to the second floor, and you'd go into the lobby which was a real nice lobby, carpeted floor, they had a booth there where you'd get your tickets and everything once you get inside. But you came in the back door of the Plaza Theater and you'd go in and once you'd get your tickets you went in and it was nice, up in the balcony. It was a good movie theater, you could see everything, but I remember feeling ( ). There were only two theaters, there used to be another theater on College Street called ( ) and that was the main Black theater, and that's long gone also. I don't know when they tore that down. The other theater was The Strand, which is now The Fine Arts Theater. Now if you'd go to The Strand Theater, there was a little side door. That door is still right there. I went there a couple months ago and the little side entrance next to the ticket booth, there's a doorway there, and that's where you bought your ticket. So you had to wait for everybody on that side to get their ticket and whatever before you, and you could stand there forever until the lady turned around and decided to give you your ticket. ( ) and you'd go up the steps once again to the balcony. At The Strand, The Fine Arts Theater. I think that entrance is closed off now. But you go up there and you sit in the balcony. At that theater they had a concession stand but it wasn't closed off, so if you're sitting in the balcony, you got lights from the concession stand. You got the bright lights from the concession stand and booth down there so it was really not a good place to sit, unless you sat in front of the concession stand, which was crowded most of the time. They'd be having a good time when you got your soda, your drink, you'd go down behind the concession stand and drop your nickel or dime into a machine, and a cup would fall down

and then the soda would go into your cup. And this particular time, somehow my cup got caught in there and my drink poured down into the thing, so you go back, try to get your money back. “No, you can’t get your money back.” So I didn’t get my money back, I didn’t have a soda. So it was just one of those things.

One thing I remember is I was with somebody and I was going to see some movie and it was Saturday, my father would drop me off at The Strand Theater and at that particular time, you’d stay all day, watch the movies and the serials, Sky King and all those, ( ), Captain Marvel, and all those things, and you could spend the day in there. So this particular time, I went to get my ticket, and he gave me my quarter and probably a dime or something to buy a drink or piece of candy, and I went to put my money on the counter and the lady said I was too old to go in, you had to be twelve years old or something to get in for a quarter, whatever it was. She told me I was too old, I had to pay the full price. So I didn’t have the full price, so I had to go and wait for my father at the bank, Bank of America right down here. I walked back down there and wait for him to come around. He was a courier for the bank. In the bank, one of his duties was going around to the branches and pick up the money and bring it back to the bank. At that particular time, he had no security, he had no weapons, nothing. He’d be taking all this money from different branches and coming back to bank. ( ). Anyway, the lady didn’t believe me so I brought my birth certificate. I went back the next Saturday and said, “See. I’m still only twelve years old. ( ) Here’s my birth certificate.” “I don’t care, that’s not you.” That’s when I stopped going because they wouldn’t let me in for a quarter. I showed them my birth certificate. ( ) Those were interesting times. I’ll tell you, I’m just reminiscing on some of that stuff right now, but that was some interesting times.

ZR: Did you do any actual boycotting, like standing in front--.

CC: Yeah, A & P, right down on College Avenue, there used to be an A & P down there. And across from the library was Kress's. You know when you went to Kress, you'd go down and get your hotdog around in back and stand there and eat it, but you couldn't sit at the lunch counter, which was, well, Kress is still there, I don't know if the lunch counter still is or not. I haven't been in there in a long time. I haven't been there in a long, long, long time. You couldn't go to the lunch counter, you'd go around the back and they had a little stand and you could get your hotdog there and take it on out to the car or something. So we got that straight. ( ) but places like that, our parents didn't want us to go. Only place we went, that I remember, was Blue Bell's Ice Cream. It used to be up by the library, right by the plaza. I think it was called Blue something, that was something we'd do sometimes. They had the best ice cream in the world. I'd always get the orange pineapple. Orange pineapple, the only place you could get that. Blue Bell, right next to the library.

ZR: So that wasn't segregated.

CC: No.

ZR: What about Dunham's?

CC: Yeah, Dunham's was--that's where I got my first, bought my first horn from, Dunham's. I don't know where it was that horn come from, I never knew they had a baritone anywhere, finally someone got one somewhere. Anyway, that's where I bought my own horn, finally, at Dunham's Music. They would encourage you to come in and

play and particularly one ( ) on piano after school, come in there and play the pianos. Yes, Dunham's was great. A great store, right next to the Bank of America, right down there on Patton Avenue. There was another music store around on Biltmore, up there on by Fain's. I don't remember that name but that's where I bought my first, what I call a professional mouthpiece, from them. I can't remember the name of the store, right next to Fain's on Biltmore. I ordered my first mouthpiece, what I call professional, well it was a better mouthpiece. It wasn't a big mouthpiece that you normally associate with baritone saxophones. You look at The Upsetters and the guys with Fats Domino, they had these metal mouthpieces, so that's the kind I wanted and that's where I got mine at the store on Biltmore Avenue. First mouthpiece. After that time I probably had ten, fifteen more after that first time. One thing about a saxophone player, you never find the correct mouthpiece, you have to keep buying them and buying them and finally after years I settled for one, but after several.

ZR: We were talking about ASCORE and now you're back to music. Did you say what your parents--did they support you in--.

CC: Yeah, they supported me. They were--. My mother, father, and my aunt, all supported me, in everything we were going to do. And they were encouraging us to continue because we weren't encouraging in any ill will about what we were doing. But you know, some of the women I knew personally didn't have too much of a problem when we had our protests, because I always had a white friend with me. So that was kind of, standing back, kind of a protest where you marched down the street or whatever because ( ).

JN: I'll bet your guitar player was there.

CC: And several others.

JN: So he stood with y'all.

CC: Oh, yeah.

ZR: Can you think of anybody else?

CC: There's a couple others. There was one guy, I don't know what his name was, Dave Smith, he wanted to be a saxophone player. I mean he was supposed to be a saxophone player, he bought a saxophone and would come around, but he never played to the point of being a saxophone player. He really tried his best and I don't know what happened to him. I don't know if he still lives in--and the other guy, in a band I used to play with, I can't remember his name either but I'm sure there were other white guys that would stand with us during the marches and so forth.

ZR: Did you all go to any other drive-ins on Tunnel Road?

CC: No. Went to Dreamland. Dreamland was out kind of in the Biltmore area I think. Was it Dreamland Drive-in?

ZR: At the end of Tunnel Road. It's so hard to imagine what it must have been like before integration, and we've heard so many comments about what a great education people got at Stephens-Lee, do you have anything you want to say in terms of what you got from being in a segregated school?

CC: Well, one of the main things which I got that you probably don't get today is a lot of knowledge about Black history. That was always talked and dwelled upon through all my school years, from Burton Street on. When I was at Burton Street, I had to do an essay about Toussaint--.

JN: The architect?

CC: Yeah, Toussaint Louverture, something like that. So it was a better age to start learning about Black history from Burton Street on through. Things were a little different because you know, getting to know where you come from and kind of give you direction on where you're going. So, I followed that all the way afterward, when I went to North Carolina Central, I went to a march with Dr. King. And he came down to Durham and had a march and sit-in and we marched with him at that particular time and in fact we were marching for some reason at the Sears Roebuck at that time. About employing people who worked at Central, I think that's what it was. But that was the only time I really had any violence, at that particular time, was when I was marching with him. And somebody was throwing bottles where we were marching, and the girl I was with had a cut on her leg from a bottle coming at her, and so that's the only violence I ever had. There's one thing, ( ) you don't find too much mention of, but during those protests and so forth, certain areas, certain guys from Alabama and Mississippi, going to college, they didn't too much care about peaceful protests. I remember this time when we were protesting with Dr. King, and bottles were thrown at us, down behind them, there was another group of guys, those guys from the college, now they would attack those guys who were going to violence but you never knew about this separate action that was going

on at that particular time. I never heard anything about the things that were going on behind the group that was behind the group.

JN: That was behind Dr. King too.

ZR: Were those students from a white school?

CC: I don't know where the students were from, the students from the Black schools would attack the guys who were throwing the bottles but you never knew about that at the time. You never heard about that side. They would just wait for that to happen, so they would have a conflict. But you never heard about that, all the things that Dr. King did, I never knew anybody who happened to mention it, I could have been harmed based on that.

JN: Cliff, you mentioned you have a sonn and did he go to an integrated school? High school?

CC: Yeah. He went to Asheville High. He didn't go to Stephens-Lee. He went to Asheville High.

JN: Did he have a good experience there? Get a good education?

CC: Well, I believe he did. He was born when I went to college, and because it was out of wedlock, so I didn't really see him grow up. He stayed with my parents, he stayed with my parents based on all this ( ) so he did go to Asheville High, and I don't know too much about his education at that particular time. But he went to Burton Street and Hill Street, but then I don't know.

JN: There was a lot of change right about that time.

CC: Yeah, a lot of change. There was David Miller.

ZR: How do you feel about Asheville today in terms of race?

CC: Like I said before, it's changed quite a bit since I was smaller, and I don't really get out too much to see what's going on, I don't come downtown that often, because I don't know where some of the places I used to frequent aren't there no more. So I don't see a lot of my old friends, they're just about all gone, so I don't really get out to see what's going on. I think it's changed, well, it's changed. But one thing I noticed that seems like the people that I spoke to about this, the old timers, they seem to be more interested in the things that my grandfather--the Black people have accomplished, they seem to be more interested than--the white people seem to be more interested than the Black leaders. And all the history and stuff that's been going on, they're not interested in, going through here and this Black person thing. So that's how it's changed. People are--I don't know how to explain it, but some of the things we did, seems like the Black kids are not interested in. They've got their own thing going on. I don't know what's going to happen.

ZR: We hear that a lot when we go to programs like at the Stephens-Lee Center, and it's basically white people that turn out when they're--.

JN: And this is the older crowd, too.

ZR: Whether it's historical, or more contemporary issues, like equity and things, it still seems to be the white people. A large part I'm sure is from being so terribly disappointed and disillusioned with anything to do with the city government, from urban renewal, the

razing of Stephens-Lee. The city ( ). I just worry that we're so segregated, downtown probably especially, I remember talking to one woman and she said, "Oh, we live just like it was in the fifties, we don't go out of our house. We're afraid to."

CC: I really don't have anywhere to go, just ( ). You could go--like Southside, that's gone. College Street down in Southside, that was a whole different street. You could start down there at the end of Eagle Street and go all the way down, closed bars and stores and everything else on the South Side, ( ). That was everything right down there, everything from funeral parlor, undertaker--.

ZR: Hotel, barber.

JN: That urban renewal was just terrible, that happened in my home town too, Atlanta. And it had the very same effect. It destroyed old Black neighborhoods, and then the people who were displaced, never really got roots again. And that's exactly what happened here. I read something this morning that said it wasn't urban renewal, it was Black removal. This was a Black person who said that, who remembered very literally when Stumptown was almost wiped out. Southside and the East End, just a fraction was left of what those neighborhoods had been. And I can tell you the same stories in Atlanta. And I was a kid then, you're a little bit older than me, but it's hard to look back on those days and think, "Well, were people doing that kind of thing intentionally, did the people who were running the federal programs know what they were doing, or did they just see older houses and say, 'Oh, these have got to go. We need an interstate here, or we need a new park here.'?" It's hard to say, it really is hard.

CC: I don't know if some of those places were just ( ) are still around.

ZR: Is Burton Street predominantly Black still?

CC: No. All my neighbors are white now. It's not bad, it's okay, but it's--.

JN: People who moved in fairly recently, the whites?

CC: Yeah, yeah. They just built a new house right next door to me and there's a white couple in there already. They just completed it a couple months ago.

ZR: Don't move. You've got to stay in there and integrate the street.

CC: That's been a lot since I was a kid. There was nothing in there. It's a small lot, just between the two houses, but they stuck a house in. Now my light bills are going up because that house shades my light. I have to keep my light on all the time. That's the light side of the house.

JN: I have a comment. What a wonderful interview and thank you for sitting here so patiently and telling us about your life, about your views of things.

CC: Probably a lot of stuff will come to me once I leave.

ZR: It's so great you have those pictures.

CC: Now there's one place they shouldn't have torn down, that's the James-Key Hotel. They used to have all kinds of entertainment at the James-Key Hotel. Everybody from Duke Ellington, James Brown, everybody.

JN: The Duke played there too?

CC: So I understand, it was a little bit before my time. All those guys--. That was at the Southland Drive-in. That was down in my house. Now my basement was like a psychedelic place. See the walls ( ). Each wall was a different color, different design.

JN: Well, it was the sixties.

CC: Everything is still down there, but it's not the same.

ZR: I've always thought if Southside was still here and intact, it would be crammed with tourists. They probably razed it trying to remove the Blacks because of tourism, and here it could have been the best spot in town.

CC: Even the train station is a good place to have. It was something to see. My father was a Pullman porter at one time.

ZR: Did your mother work when she was--.

CC: Yeah, she did some, I don't know exactly what she was doing but she ended up working with a senior thing over here, it was HCH, something like that. Some senior organization.

ZR: Not Senior Opportunities?

CC: I thought it was HCH, what does that stand for? I might have it wrong but--.

ZR: It's just so great that she got to go to college. Thank you so much for your time.

JN: Have you scanned all those, Zoe, on a previous occasion?

ZR: I don't know if we have the one that was inside the Keys Hotel. Or this one.

CC: James-Keys Hotel. That's Cornell Proctor, the piano player, he still plays at church.

JN: And he's still here in town?

CC: Tried Stone is where he belongs. That was on Band Stand. ( ). That's somebody else. Everybody had their name on their bandstand.

ZR: What were these? Did they hold the music?

CC: It was a bandstand, a music stand.

JN: Did you enjoy being a vocalist?

CC: Yeah, I thought I could sing back in the day. I was a bass singer.

JN: Was it three or four of you singing?

CC: Four. Charles Pickens, he continued to sing until he died a few years ago. But he was great. Matter of fact, he joined us--we pulled him into the Fiery Sparks when we went to Smalls Paradise. No. I mean while we were playing in Philadelphia. We weren't getting too much money in Philadelphia, so he left the group. Matter of fact, it happened that he left the group and left and came back home, and said, "No, I'm going back," before we went to Smalls Paradise.

JN: Did he stick with music?

CC: Yes. He sang in town up until he died a few years ago. Right here in town. Charles Pickens. Never heard of him singing around town?

ZR: Did your family go to church when you were growing up?

CC: Well, my mother and my father and grandmother went across the street to St. Paul. My mother was a member of the Calvary Baptist too, so I'd go to church with her sometimes. And I'd go across the street to St. Paul sometimes. Between the two it was totally different, Baptist and Presbyterian.

ZR: We wonder how much in that time period, ministers might have had to do with education.

CC: Not too much in my case. I was from a spiritual family and my mother was always playing piano. One thing I remember about her is she did not play by ear. I'd say, "Come on Mama, let's play this song," and she had to have her music. So she was strictly by the book. I remember one of the--you couldn't buy too much music at that time and I couldn't find music and one of the guys said, "I remember one song that I found a sheet at Dunham's," and it was called Green Door. I had the sheet music for Green Door, and she played Green Door and I played along with her.

JN: My experience is that piano players who grew up learning proper music and learning how to play from sheet music, they never learned to play by ear. That's the only way I can play. Doc Lennon would have told me, "Okay, I'm glad you can hear it but you've got to learn the music." I needed a teacher to tell me that. He did you all a great favor.

CC: Yeah, he made sure that strutted out with music.

ZR: Do you know Butch Dendy? His real name is William, goes by Butch. He lived over on Madison Street, off Charlotte.

CC: No.

ZR: He wanted to be in the band and he loved music but he couldn't read and whenever Lennon would give out sheet music, he'd go down to Dunham's and buy it or listen to it and learn it that way. He kind of got by for a while but then he told us that one day, there was an extra note that he played and Doc said, "I like that, let's add that." He gotten it from whatever he listened to. And then the next time, whatever he played, the other ones weren't there, so he fell apart and Lennon said, "Stop the music. Son, you can't read music, can you"' and he said, "No," and he said, "You're out of here." It seems so sad because he loved music so much.

CC: Yeah, he insisted we learn the music.

JN: By any chance, do you know Gary McDaniel? He is a minister now at a church off Phifer. He was in the band. He came along later, he's probably about my age, five or six years younger than you. One of the first things he remembered was that we all had to learn how to read music. And he emphasized that point a lot. And then he was in the marching band, and that was at the time when they paraded all downtown Asheville. And he thought that was just the biggest thing in his life at the time. Walking into the stadium was what they did at the end of parade and he said the crowd would go crazy when Stephens-Lee would go in. Those were some of his memories. He started out having to read the music.

CC: Marching down Patton Avenue with the parade--when it first started, they finally had to put us in the back of the parade, because normally we'd be in the front, once we started playing, the crowd would follow us, and the rest of the parade was still in the parade.

JN: And Gary said the very same thing, and he said, “We had to be behind Santa Claus because if we were in front of Santa Claus, nobody would pay attention to St. Nick.” What a band you all had, and Lennon, there has to be a teacher with that personality behind the whole thing. He sounds like he was just friendly enough and just demanding enough, that you wanted to work for him.

CC: You’re right, he was.

ZR: Thank you so much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW.